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AND
SOCIAL REFORM.

BY

ARTHUR BAKER, M.A.,
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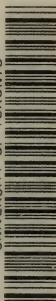
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BY

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Classical Master, Independent College, Taunton.

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P R E F A C E .

The following paper comprises the substance of an address delivered before members of the Taunton Liberal Club, and of the Taunton Liberal and Radical Association ; but the thoughts which it embodies are also familiar to a good many working-class audiences in the North of England, and have recently found expression in the columns of the *Somerset Express*. The writer has issued the essay in its present form in the hope of drawing the attention of Liberals and Radicals to the great social and industrial questions which lie before us, and the spirit in which we must approach them. Too long have we advocated material progress simply because it is material progress, and have sought to solve the problems of life by appealing to the lowest passions of man. If the gospel of Radicalism is to be something more than political jugglery, it must advocate the right, not because it pays, though pay it must, but because it appeals to more than mere self-interest and satisfies the purest aspirations and deepest instincts of the thinking soul.

WEIRFIELD, TAUNTON.

April, 1890.



INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS AND SOCIAL REFORM.



IN our literature of travel there is perhaps no picture more striking than Kinglake's description of the impassive Sphinx of the desert: ever stolidly immovable it has beheld Pharaoh succeed Pharaoh and Ptolemy Ptolemy, it has seen the monks of Upper Egypt give way to the followers of Mahomet and, with half a sneer and half a smile on its motionless countenance, has watched the successive invasions of Greeks and Romans, of Arabs and Turks. Our English Sphinx is the social problem. Towering above foreign complications, above religious controversies, above parliamentary disputes, it surpasses in its many-sidedness and importance all the temporary questions of the day. One minister succeeds another, wars pass away and are forgotten, but the social problem remains ever with us, pressing itself on our attention and growing more and more importunate for a solution. Wherever we go, whatever be our business, the terrible contrast between rich and poor, educated and ignorant, filthy and respectable, stares us in the face; we see it in the beggar that wanders along the road, in the foul back-slums that nestle behind our grandest streets, in the hideous structures erected by the

guardians of the poor. It has been the spectre that has overshadowed the whole of our modern history, and from the narrative of military successes abroad and constitutional victories at home we continually turn to social revolts and the oppression of the labouring class. True, our own age has seen a vast development of mechanical power and a corresponding increase in national wealth, but a large proportion of that increase has gone into the pockets of the few, and the gulf between classes and masses is as wide and deep as ever it was before. The labourer obtained little more than a bare livelihood centuries ago ; he obtains little more than a bare livelihood to-day. But if the father of economics could have foreseen the introduction of machinery into every branch of industry, his generous fancy would have pictured a new world where all the drudgery of human toil should be performed by this new servant, where all that was disagreeable in necessary work should become its special task, where owing to its rapid and unceasing efforts leisure should everywhere abound. But what has proved to be the case ? Machinery, which should have been the slave of man, has enthralled its master, it has been used to bring profit to the employer rather than relief to the worker, and life has too often become gloomier and harder because of its controlling sway. Surely there is some ground for thinking that we have left the engine of progress to pursue its course alone, dragging perhaps a few carriages after it which are occupied by the employing class ; but the rear of the train and the working masses which it contains have become uncoupled from the

rest. Yearly the rift widens, yearly the speed down the industrial incline increases; if the brake be not put on, in vain will the engine back to take us up again, and in the final crash of opposing forces violent revolution may take the place of thoughtful reform. Our alms and charities are but pebbles placed beneath the thundering mass, if thus perchance we may stay its course; one-sided statistics merely serve to bandage the eyes of those who would fain be blind to the woe that is sown in the present and the havoc that the future will reap.

But it is not in its material aspect that the social problem is most appalling. The existence of the masses of our people is wasted in the dreary round of work and sleep and food, and, save that they breathe and eat, their life might be death itself. Yet they have capacities for a higher life to which they are dead, faculties which might be developed, and a power of apprehension which is dwarfed and stunted within the narrow limits of their mental horizon. There is no lack of energy, but there is a miserable lack of worthy objects on which that energy can be fastened so as to draw out every latent power, fan into a flame the spark of the divine within us, and transfigure the whole nature of man. To supply such ideals, then, as will afford an aim and purpose in life, to bring home the things of the mind to men who are absorbed in the things of the body, to quicken the stagnant lethargy of an objectless existence into the glowing activity of moral and intellectual growth, such is the goal of the social reformer

who sees in mere outward degradation the least of the evils against which he contends. Were nothing more than material prosperity the basis of his gospel, his heart would have been sickened long ago by ceaseless opposition, by the mistrust of selfish co-workers, by doubts of his own apostleship, by the thickness of the gloom around him, by the faintness of the signs which herald the coming dawn. Yet while he would fain neglect externals and solely aim at fostering and educating the germs of a higher life, he finds himself thwarted at every step by obstacles in the material environment that bar the way to all higher progress, by conditions of industry that choke every nobler aspiration and deaden with subtle contagion every upward striving of intellect and soul. A brief survey of these obstacles may prove of service by placing in clear relief the obstructions that dam the current of social reform, and by raising in definite outline the problem whether it be possible so to modify the environment that it shall be no longer a hindrance but even an incentive to a truer and less material life.

The principle of *laissez faire* which lies at the root of our industrial system finds its logical outcome in deliberate abstention from any effort to secure the organisation of labour and to prevent the interests of individuals from conflicting with the interests of the community at large. The tide of human energy and human capacity flows without ebb, but so little of its force is directed to the common good, and its main current is ever turning the competitive

wheel whereby the individual is raised at the expense of his fellows and each seeks to gain an advantage over his neighbour rather than lift all to a higher level. The mere waste of money and material power which this process involves is of itself incalculable ; the energy and time absorbed in a variety of isolated and competing efforts would, if directed into one and the same channel, have a force and effect quite out of proportion to that of the tiny rivulets in which each at present flows. But our industrial chaos is responsible for far more than material waste. The workshop of the world is full of human instruments adapted to every purpose of life, ponderous hammers and tiny saws, massive hatchets and razors of the keenest edge. But it is very rarely that any of these tools finds its appropriate task ; the sledge-hammer drives in our tacks and the razor cuts our logs. There are men who have an accurate appreciation of the niceties of reasoning and a wonderful capacity for the quest of truth ; but often these men are found not in our law-courts and universities but overwhelmed by the pressure of a business career. The names of many who have the highest talent for mercantile pursuits are enrolled not in the commercial directory but in the army list ; others whose physical powers and natural disposition would fit them for the army are chained to the desk. There are but thirty or forty students each year at Cambridge who attain the highest mathematical standard, yet that number should be multiplied by more than a hundred if all who had the ability were given the opportunity of developing it. The true wealth of England

lies not in her iron and her coal but in the talents and capacities of her children, but she seems only to care to develop her spurious wealth and leaves her genuine treasure to rot and to rust. Thus the round men fill the square holes and the square men the round, and faculties which in a congenial environment might have reached a fair maturity, die out through disuse. Of course it will be urged that, after all, a man very soon adapts himself to his work and that the best men do ultimately struggle to the front. But the wear and tear of the process is pitiful to contemplate and for the most sensitive natures entirely intolerable. Many a man has never realised his soul's ideal because the struggle of life has diverted his capacities to a lower level ; and even those who do clamber through this obstacle that bars the way are piteously scarred by the contest and exhausted in the effort, they have lost the freshness of their inspiration and have consumed their own heart in the bitterness of the conflict.

Moreover the competitive basis of our industrial system seems to block the future of every scheme of social reform. The advocates of thrift look forward to a day when every farm labourer who earns twelve shillings a week will save two, but when that day comes there will be a terrible, if silent, struggle. For it will be shewn that the agricultural labourer can live on ten shillings, and if the farmers decline to offer as much as before, competition will gradually drive wages down to the lower rate which has

been proved sufficient. Again, our present standard of subsistence amongst the working classes includes beer and the total abstainer makes a clear gain ; but if total abstinence became almost universal, the sum required for livelihood would be lowered and wages correspondingly decreased. The man who can do without the extra two shillings for liquor or insurance, will not be two shillings the better but will merely take the place of his more expensive comrades, just as the economical Chinaman is ousting European labour from our colonies. Thus the workman's thrift and abstinence as soon as it becomes fairly universal, will benefit not himself but his master, and instead of swelling his own resources will partly cheapen his produce and partly add to the profits of the employing class. This too is the fatal objection to the scheme of Henry George ; his land-tax would so far decrease our burdens as to cheapen tea and tobacco and every taxed commodity, but it would thereby lessen the weekly sum required for livelihood, and wages would sink to the lowered level of subsistence. Of course there is a ready answer to this argument. We are told that universal trades-unionism and combination of labour will consolidate the disintegrating tendencies of competition and prevent any fall in the standard of subsistence. But this is a remedy which implies that the battle between capital and labour will never cease, and permanently divides the nation into two hostile camps ; and we have recently seen that it cannot effect a mere adjustment of wages without a social war which brings with it the impoverishment of

scores of thousands and imperils the commerce of the world. We shall perhaps be nearer a right solution if we remember what the older economists so conspicuously failed to see, that economic laws only state and expound existing conditions of industry and that new conditions will require new laws.

If we look more closely at the industrial conditions which mar the hopes of social reform, we shall find three specific obstacles which stand in the way of every effort to raise the moral and intellectual level of our people. The first of these is want of means. Many a worker has to choose between boots for his children and books for himself, between the requirements of the mere body, and a dim and often dumb craving, perhaps even to his own nature but half revealed, for some share in the heart-life of thought or music or art. And when hard times come to him, as under a system of unorganised competition they cannot but come, it is the books and pictures that are the first to go, and all his efforts to enlarge his mental horizon and gain a grasp of something beyond his lower self are cramped by the fatal lethargy of despair. The second obstacle is want of leisure. The tramway-man, who can scarcely reach his home by midnight and quits it again at early dawn, is no unique product of our industrial life; so long as wages are based on a system of competition which by setting man against man drives the lot of all to the lowest depth compatible with continued existence, so long the majority of our industrial population will be bound

to accept any and every condition of work, because it is the sole alternative to absolute starvation. Hence in the lives of many there is no leisure for the things of the mind; and even when the evening is free, the hard pressure of unceasing toil demands physical compensation, and the drunkenness of our land is but the natural reaction against conditions of life and work which press for a powerful antidote. The third obstacle is want of certainty of employment. No man can be expected to form any consistent aim in life, to cherish a definite purpose, to devote his powers to a fixed end, if he cannot tell what are the means on which he may count or how many steps it is from his door to the workhouse. It is no wonder that this uncertainty of livelihood leads to an aimless and miserable life, gross and extravagant in fitful periods of prosperity, brutal and savage, by reason of hope deferred, in the long nights of adverse times. We have seen the din of the battle of life penetrate even to the wise man's cell, and strike its discordant note on the harp that bewitches and enthral's a listening world. Yet with such men it has not been a question of utter need; but a fall in stocks that threatened a mere superfluity of income has been sufficient to spoil the music of higher things. What shall we expect then of those whose unpractised hand is but essaying to sweep the strings for the first time, when the jarring note speaks not of a mere docking of luxuries, but of the workhouse and the streets? The doubt of what the coming dawn may bring cannot but ever destroy that restfulness of heart which is the first requisite for any continuous

course of study or thought, whereby the mind shall soar beyond the fogs and mists of material surroundings into the clear sunlight of a purer and higher life.

Lastly, the poisonous atmosphere of competitive industry blights our very nature, and leaves its desolating mark on the evolution of the race. We are told that the form and character of a plant are modified through countless generations by the nature of its environment; on stony ground, for instance, the weakest vegetation dies out, but the more hardy varieties remain and develop the characteristics that best fit them for the soil; the tender shoots of a tree that find no nourishment are gradually discarded, its more sturdy parts encroach on the province thus left vacant, and ultimately a new species is the result. So it is with the character of man. The elements of his nature that meet with no response in the world around him wither and decay, the passions and affections that are ever being called into play are disproportionately developed and usurp a commanding position that should never have been theirs. Thus the character of man is very largely the product of his environment, and what there is in it of hereditary tendencies is the product of hereditary environment, that is, of the surroundings which moulded and fashioned his ancestors; and so long as the mould into which the raw material of humanity is run remains ugly and awry, the product will retain the same characteristics. Now our environment is essentially one of competition, where push and graspingness and greed secure every prize, where self-sacrifice and gentleness and

brotherhood are dwarfed and withered and crushed out in the natures which fall under its control. It is in vain for the preacher to tell of the beauties of co-operation, of working together for mutual good, when in the school of life but one lesson is taught, competition for mutual harm. The qualities adapted to the environment are those that will be fostered and matured, and these qualities are selfishness of soul, narrowness of mind and hardness of heart. It may be that competitive industry combines the maximum of production with the minimum of cost ; but the maximum of production is not the sole end of man. If the vast superstructure of our material civilisation cannot rest on any other foundation than the moral and physical degradation of the working-class, if no mortar can cement it other than the sweat and tears of ceaseless toil, it were better to abandon conditions of industry which deaden the higher energies, blunt the unselfish capacities, and brutalise every faculty of heart and soul.

The days of chivalry, we are told, are past ; there are no fair maidens left to be rescued by valorous knights, no dragons to overcome, no heathen paynims to be expelled from their lordship over earth's most sacred spots, no Holy Graal to be the quest of every pure and adventurous heart. But it is only the outward husk of these noble dreams and exploits that is gone from us, their inner kernel and underlying spirit is for all time. We have still dragons to contend with, the dragons of our material environment that prey on every endeavour to compass a higher life ; we

have still fair maidens to rescue, labour enslaved by competition that grinds all beneath a heel of iron ; we have still a Holy Graal to stir the ambition of all whose gaze is not earthward, the co-operative commonwealth which shall realise the ideal of the brotherhood of man.



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